Vār-e Jamkard: Myth as a Model of Resilience and Defensive Architecture in the Iranian Cultural Imagination.

From Climatic Catastrophe to Civilizational Preservation: Reinterpreting the Myth of Jamshid's Enclosure as an Architectural Technology of Survival.

Written by: Maryam Gomizi (Mary G)

Series: Persian Art Chronicle

Article ID: PAC-2026-0016

Version: 1.0

Published:26 July 2026

Estimated Reading Time:25 minutes

Word Count: Approximately 3400 words

Number of Figures: 6

Number of Tables: 1

Number of References: 15

Mission Statement:

Persian Art Chronicle is an independent long-form research project by Maryam Gomizi-(Mary G) dedicated to documenting, analyzing, and interpreting the history of Iranian art from mythical antiquity to the contemporary era through an interdisciplinary artistic and scholarly perspective.

Citation Information:

Gomizi, Maryam. (2026). Vār-e Jamkard: Myth as a Model of Resilience and Defensive Architecture in the Iranian Cultural Imagination. *Persian Art Chronicle,* PAC-2026-0016.

Abstract:

Among the most remarkable spatial narratives preserved within Iranian mythological tradition is *Vār-e Jamkard* (Jamshid's Enclosure). Described in the *Vendidad*, this protected habitat was constructed under divine instruction to shield life from a catastrophic climatic winter. While most ancient mythologies frame existential threats through the lenses of warfare, divine wrath, or mass migration, the Iranian narrative introduces a striking alternative: architecture, environmental management, and spatial design as primary technologies of survival.

This article investigates the conceptual foundations of *Vār-e Jamkard*, evaluating it as an early cultural paradigm of ecological resilience and civilizational continuity. Integrating Avestan textual analysis, historiography, spatial phenomenology, and cultural memory theory, we examine how this myth articulates a distinct environmental ethic. Rather than seeking historical verification of a literal structure, we argue that the *Vār* functions as a sophisticated cognitive model. In this narrative, architecture ceases to be a static backdrop or a display of dynastic power; instead, it becomes an active organism that preserves biological diversity, technical craftsmanship, and social memory.

Contrasting the *Vār* with neighboring Near Eastern traditions—most notably Mesopotamian vertical monumentality—this study reveals an earthward, protective spatial logic prioritized over imperial projection. Finally, drawing on modern intellectual readings, particularly those of Shahrokh Meskoob, we highlight how the *Vār* continues to serve as an enduring metaphor for cultural endurance in the face of historical disruption.

Keywords: Vār-e Jamkard; Iranian Mythology; Architectural Resilience; Cultural Memory; Vendidad; Environmental Adaptation

1-Introduction:

Few spatial concepts in Iranian cultural history carry the symbolic density of *Vār-e Jamkard*. Embedded deep within Avestan lore and codified in the *Vendidad*, the myth tells of a vast sanctuary built by Yima (Jamshid) to shelter a curated microcosm of humanity, fauna, flora, and material heritage from a lethal, world-altering winter (Darmesteter, 1898; Boyce, 1975).

At first glance, the story echoes classic ancient flood and cataclysm sagas. Yet, a closer reading unveils a radical conceptual departure. Where other traditions look to miraculous intervention, military prowess, or desperate exodus, the Iranian tradition turns to design. Survival, in this worldview, is an architectural problem. Crucially, the enclosure is neither a royal palace nor a military stronghold. It is a carefully calibrated environment engineered to sustain life's metabolic and cultural rhythms. Within its walls reside not conquerors, but artisans, farmers, botanical seeds, and the raw foundations of civilization. Thus, the *Vār* emerges as one of humanity's earliest conceptualizations of built space as an instrument of ecological and cultural continuity.

This article unpacks the broader implications of this spatial imagination. Moving beyond literal attempts to verify the myth archaeologically, we probe the intellectual and symbolic machinery driving the narrative. Why did ancient Iranian thought privilege environmental design over conquest when confronting existential crisis?

To answer this, our study addresses three core questions:

1. How does the *Vār* narrative operate within the wider tapestry of Iranian mythology?
2. What spatial and ecological principles govern its design?
3. How does this ancient blueprint echo across Iranian cultural memory and modern theories of resilience?

We argue that *Vār-e Jamkard* is far more than a mythic refuge; it is a foundational paradigm of resilient design where architecture acts as a guardian of life, knowledge, and continuity.

2-Historical and Cultural Context:

To analyze the spatial logic of Vār-e Jamkard, it is essential to examine the mythological evolution of Yima, the environmental realities of the Iranian plateau, and the vernacular responses developed to sustain life.

Yima in Iranian Mythological Tradition:

The figure of Yima (Jamshid) holds a seminal place in the Iranian consciousness. Across centuries, his persona evolved from an Avestan culture hero into the ideal sovereign of epic literature (Boyce,

1975). In early texts, Yima is not portrayed as a conqueror, but as an expander and nurturer of the earth. As life flourishes under his stewardship, he repeatedly enlarges the earth's spatial boundaries to accommodate its growing inhabitants—a narrative trajectory distinct from traditional ancient kingship centered on territorial subjugation (Skjærvø, 2006).

The *Vār* narrative fits seamlessly into this nurturer archetype. Warned by Ahura Mazda of an impending, deadly freeze, Yima is tasked not with raising an army, but with curating and sheltering exemplary specimens of creation (*Vendidad*, Fargard 2; **Figure 1**). The emphasis remains steadfastly on preservation and continuity over power projection.

Figure 1: Illustrated Folio from a Vendidad Manuscript, showcasing Avestan/Pahlavi scripts alongside cosmological floral iconography. The layout reflects the Vār as an ordered, protected ecosystem governed by spatial symmetry (Source: Traditional Avestan Manuscript Archive).

Climate, Environment, and Cultural Memory:

Scholars have long debated whether the *Vār* myth preserves echoes of ancient environmental crises, such as glacial shifts or severe regional droughts (Gnoli, 1980; Lincoln, 1981). While

caution is necessary when correlating myth with direct geology, cultural memory studies demonstrate that collective trauma and environmental adaptation frequently crystallize into symbolic narratives (Assmann, 2011). The *Vār* represents a structured cultural mental map for processing ecological vulnerability, asserting that foresight and planning can mitigate climate shocks.

Architecture and Survival on the Iranian Plateau:

The harsh topography of the Iranian plateau—characterized by extreme temperature swings and chronic aridity—demanded creative vernacular interventions (Kiani, 1982). Inventions like *qanats* (subterranean aqueducts), ice houses (*yakhchāls*), windcatchers (*bādgirs*), and troglodytic settlements highlight an ancient architectural philosophy rooted in earthward adaptation rather than surface dominance (**Figure 2**; Beazley & Harverson, 1982). Though no direct archaeological lineage links these technologies directly to the mythic *Vār*, they inhabit the same conceptual universe: architecture as an active mediator between human survival and harsh natural forces.

Figure 2: Subterranean Architectural Network of Nushabad (Ouyi), Central Iran. Multi-level earth-sheltered spaces carved into sedimentary earth, embodying the practical, climate-responsive, earthward spatial intelligence conceptualized in the Vār myth.

3-Literature Review:

Academic engagement with the *Vār* myth has passed through several major interpretive waves:

- **19th-Century Philology:** Early Orientalists, notably James Darmesteter (1898), classified the *Vendidad* text primarily within comparative flood-myth frameworks. Later structuralist readings by Prods Oktor Skjærvø (2006) emphasized the oral transmission dynamics of the Avesta, treating the *Vār* as a textual crystallization of ritualized order and communal preservation during times of historical displacement.
- **Kingship and Mythic Structures:** Arthur Christensen (1934) bridged myth and statecraft, arguing that Yima's enclosure symbolized ordered civilization standing firm against cosmic and socio-political chaos.
- **Ecological and Environmental Readings:** Mid-to-late 20th-century scholars like Gherardo Gnoli (1980) and Bruce Lincoln (1981) probed the myth's ecological undertones, connecting it to ancestral memories of climatic hardship across the Eurasian steppe and plateau.
- **Cultural Memory Theory:** Contemporary approaches, grounded in Jan Assmann's (2011) framework, view the *Vār* as a "mnemonic architecture"—a narrative vessel constructed to preserve core cultural values, social structures, and existential identity across historical ruptures.

4-Theoretical Framework:

To grasp the multi-layered nature of *Vār-e Jamkard*, this study synthesizes four theoretical lenses:

1. **Cultural Memory Studies (Jan Assmann):** Analyzes how foundational stories function as societal reservoirs, preserving collective identity through spatial and symbolic metaphors (Assmann, 2011).
2. **Symbolic Forms (Ernst Cassirer):** Treats myth not as pre-scientific fantasy, but as a legitimate cognitive mechanism through which human cultures construct meaning and transform chaos into spatial order (Cassirer, 1946).

3. **Phenomenology of Space (Martin Heidegger):** Draws upon concepts of *dwelling* and protected habitation, where built boundaries create a meaningful, sheltered interior capable of sustaining human existence against an indifferent exterior world (Heidegger, 1971).
4. **Material Culture and Resilience Theory (C.S. Holling; Carl Folke):** Frames architecture as an active participant in socio-ecological systems, evaluating how spatial design enables systems to absorb major disturbances while retaining core functions (Folke, 2006).

5-Methodology:

This research adopts a comprehensive, qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology designed to analyze *Vār-e Jamkard* as both a textual artifact and a conceptual architectural prototype. The methodological design integrates five interconnected analytical stages:

Stage 1: Textual Philology and Exegesis:

The primary foundation rests on textual analysis of *Vendidad* Fargard 2. We analyze the Avestan terms describing spatial dimensions, environmental attributes, selection criteria, and architectural mechanics. This is supplemented by cross-referencing Middle Persian (Pahlavi) commentaries and later epic adaptations in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* to track the narrative's symbolic evolution.

Stage 2: Historical-Comparative Spatial Analysis:

We contextualize the spatial logic of the *Vār* by comparing it with contemporary ancient Near Eastern spatial models, specifically Mesopotamian urbanism (e.g., Uruk, Ur) and Anatolian defensive networks. This stage highlights structural contrasts in orientation, purpose, accessibility, and environmental engagement.

Stage 3: Phenomenological Mapping:

Using Heideggerian spatial phenomenology, we analyze the structural dichotomy between the hostile exterior (the freezing *Mahrkūša* winter) and the protected interior (*Vār*). We examine how

spatial boundaries are conceptualized to construct a self-sustaining ecosystem that guarantees thermal, biological, and cultural safety.

Stage 4: Socio-Ecological Systems (SES) and Resilience Modeling:

We apply contemporary resilience frameworks—specifically Holling's adaptive cycle and Folke's socio-ecological system resilience model—to evaluate the *Vār* as a theoretical system. We map the enclosure's mechanisms for resource curation, genetic selection, technical skill preservation, and post-catastrophe regeneration.

Stage 5: Historiographical Synthesis and Cultural Memory Analysis:

Finally, drawing on Jan Assmann's cultural memory theory and Shahrokh Meskoob's philosophical critiques, we synthesize how the myth operated as a psychological and intellectual refuge for Iranian society during periods of severe geopolitical or cultural disruption.

6-Main Analysis:

Architecture as the Guardian of Creation:

Across the ancient Near East, monumental architecture served primarily as an engine of political intimidation or imperial self-glorification. Palaces projected dynastic dominance; ziggurats and temples anchored state theology; perimeter walls marked the edge of conquered territories. The narrative of *Vār-e Jamkard* in the *Vendidad* completely upends this paradigm. Here, spatial creation drops its imperial pretenses and adopts a thoroughly ecocentric mandate.

When Ahura Mazda warns Yima of the lethal winter (*Mahrkūša*), the building instructions do not call for a defensive bastion against human enemies or a victory monument (*Vendidad*, Fargard 2). Instead, the text details a meticulous, closed-loop sanctuary designed to shelter living organisms, botanical genetic material, domestic livestock, and sacred fires. Built space shifts from an instrument of external coercion to an internal sanctuary focused on systemic equilibrium.

The Preservation of Diversity and Technical Knowledge:

A striking feature of the *Vendidad* text lies in its selection criteria for entering the *Vār*. Admission is not a reward for aristocratic lineage, royal blood, or military prowess. Entry depends strictly on biological health, structural integrity, and utilitarian function.

Beyond preserving biological specimens, the text explicitly commands Yima to include skilled artisans, builders, and agrarian specialists. The narrative highlights a crucial insight: surviving a crisis biologically is futile if a society loses its accumulated material techniques, spatial wisdom, and artistic crafts. The *Vār* functions as a dual incubator—protecting both physical biodiversity and the intangible cultural knowledge required to reboot civilization once the environmental trauma passes (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3: Copper Ewers (Abriq), Regional Museum of Southeast Iran, Zahedan. Traditional metalwork representing the historical continuity of specialized craftsmanship prioritized within the Vār narrative.

Earthward Architecture vs. Vertical Monumentality:

Comparing the *Vār* to neighboring spatial archetypes reveals a fundamental philosophical divide. Mesopotamian urban planning centered heavily on verticality—monumental ziggurats stretching skyward to demonstrate the ruler's divine connection and political authority (Crawford, 2015).In contrast, the *Vār* adopts an earthward, introverted logic. It shuns public visibility and vertical reach, prioritizing thermal stability, microclimate regulation, and subterranean protection. To clarify how this Iranian spatial archetype contrasts structurally and philosophically with traditional Near Eastern models, **Table 1** synthesizes these core dimensions:

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Ancient Near Eastern Architectural Archetypes.

Analytical Dimension	Mesopotamian Monumentality (e.g., Ziggurats, Palaces)	Classical Defensive Architecture (e.g., Fortresses)	Vār-e Jamkard (Iranian Ecological Model)
Primary Mandate	Projection of divine and political dominance	Defense against external military threats	Biological, technical, and cultural preservation
Spatial Orientation	Vertical, skyward, highly visible	Perimeter-focused, heavily fortified	Earthward, subterranean/introverted, protective
Systemic Logic	Hierarchical control & state display	Structural resistance to physical force	Closed-loop ecological resilience & thermal balance
Target Population	Ruling elite & priestly class	Military garrisons & combat forces	Diverse flora, fauna, seeds, & skilled artisans
Temporal Focus	Commemorative / Retrospective	Immediate tactical response	Anticipatory / Prospective (Pre-disaster design)

Qualitative Selection and the Ethics of Anticipatory Design:

The spatial organization of the *Vār* operates through a strict ethical and qualitative filter. The *Vendidad* specifies that individuals with physical deformities, contagious illnesses, or moral corruption are excluded (*Vendidad*, Fargard 2.29). In Avestan dualism, physical defect and disease were viewed as direct manifestations of *Ahrimanic* (demonic) disruption. By filtering out these flaws, the *Vār* serves as a pristine biological and moral baseline designed to regenerate an uncorrupted world.

This spatial setup represents an early form of **anticipatory design** (Vale & Campanella, 2005). Traditional monuments are built after events occur to commemorate victories or solidify power. The *Vār*, however, is designed entirely in anticipation of a future threat. Foresight dictates design, and design enables survival. The entire operational sequence of this anticipatory framework—from initial climate warning to post-crisis recovery—is mapped in **Figure 4**:

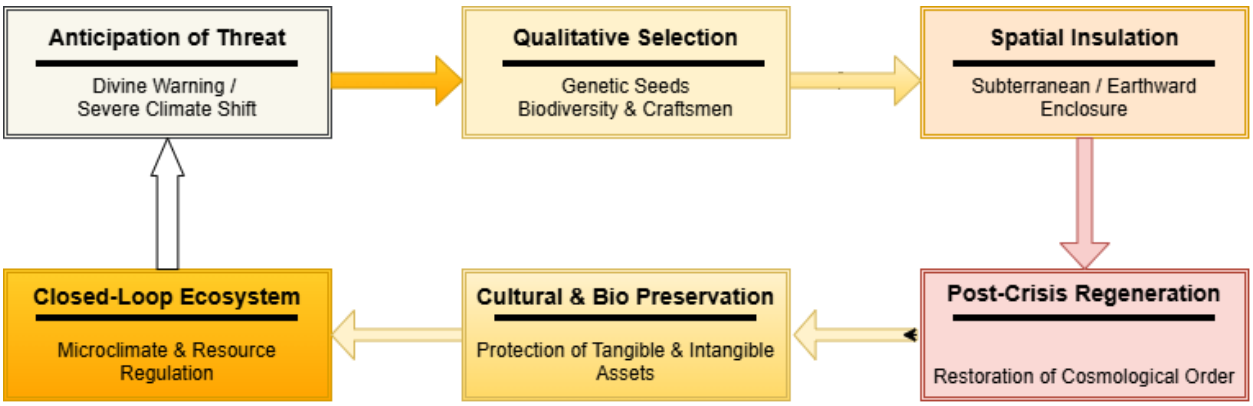

Figure 4: Systemic Flow Diagram of Vār-e Jamkard as an Integrated Model of Resilient Spatial Planning.

7. Discussion:

The Eco-Centric Paradigm in Ancient Near Eastern Architecture:

The operational logic of *Vār-e Jamkard* presents a profound ideological divergence from the dominant urban paradigms of the ancient Near East. While Mesopotamian monumental architecture celebrated the conquest of nature and the subjugation of foreign territories (Crawford, 2015), the Iranian *Vār* codifies a worldview centered on planetary stewardship, containment, and

ecological equilibrium. Spatial boundaries are constructed not to exclude human enemies, but to shelter the vital elements of creation from ecological collapse.

This orientation reflects a deep-seated cultural anxiety regarding environmental vulnerability on the Iranian plateau. Artefacts from early plateau civilizations demonstrate a long-standing iconographic focus on conserving agrarian, botanical, and animal resources (**Figure 5**). The *Vār* narrative formalizes this material heritage into a comprehensive spatial model, asserting that human survival is inextricably linked to the preservation of wider socio-ecological networks.

Figure 5: Chlorite Pedestal Vessel with Relief of a Palm Tree, Jiroft Culture (c. 2500 BCE). Symmetrical iconography highlighting early plateau anxieties regarding the preservation of vital botanical assets.

Spatial Archetypes and Intangible Cultural Memory:

Beyond its immediate functional mechanics, the *Vār* functions as a persistent spatial archetype within the collective Iranian imagination. As Jan Assmann (2011) notes in his theory of cultural memory, foundational narratives provide cognitive blueprints that shape a society's physical and spatial responses over centuries.

The inward-looking, self-contained spatial matrix of the *Vār* reemerges continuously across Iranian architectural history. From subterranean settlements designed for climatic survival to traditional Iranian courtyard houses and desert caravanserais, Iranian space consistently prioritizes interior protection, thermal insulation, and boundary integrity (**Figure 6**). These

structures embody an enduring spatial wisdom—a material continuation of the *Vār* ethos that uses architecture as an active shield against hostile external conditions.

Figure 6: Aerial view of a Safavid-era Caravanserai. Self-contained, inward-looking spatial matrix utilizing massive boundary perimeters to shield life and commerce from environmental hostility.

Reinterpreting Myth as Anticipatory Spatial Logic:

By bridging mythological exegesis with contemporary spatial theory, this study demonstrates that *Vār-e Jamkard* is far more than an ancient survival fable. It constitutes an early conceptualization of anticipatory design—a framework that uses foresight to engineer resilient, closed-loop habitats capable of absorbing severe environmental shocks.

Re-reading the *Vendidad* through this lens restores the intellectual agency of ancient plateau cultures, showing how myth served as a sophisticated medium for storing, transmitting, and operationalizing complex environmental and architectural knowledge across generations.

8. Conclusion

This study has re-examined the narrative of *Vār-e Jamkard* in the Avestan *Vendidad* not as a relic of ancient mythology, but as an early, highly sophisticated conceptualization of eco-centric and resilient architectural planning. By shifting the analytical lens from traditional flood-myth philology to spatial phenomenology and socio-ecological resilience theory, the investigation

reveals how ancient plateau cultures constructed a dynamic mental model for disaster mitigation and cultural survival.

Key insights derived from this research include:

1. **Redefining Monumentality:** Unlike neighboring Mesopotamian spatial strategies centered on imperial display and vertical dominance, the *Vār* establishes an introverted, earthward architecture directed toward thermal insulation, resource conservation, and microclimate stability.

2. **Dual Preservation Logic:** The *Vār* functions as an integrated container designed to preserve both tangible biodiversity (genetic seeds, livestock, human flora) and intangible cultural heritage (artisanal skills, spatial intelligence, and technical crafts).

3. **Anticipatory Design Ethics:** The *Vendidad* text codifies an early framework of prospective architecture, where spatial boundaries are configured prior to environmental disruption through rigorous qualitative and biological selection criteria.

Ultimately, *Vār-e Jamkard* serves as a foundational spatial archetype within Iranian architectural heritage. Its core principles—introversion, boundary integrity, closed-loop resource management, and protective insulation—continue to echo across the vernacular traditions of the Iranian plateau, demonstrating the enduring power of myth as a reservoir of spatial wisdom and socio-ecological resilience.

9-Researcher & Artist Reflection:

As both a researcher and an artist, I find Vār-e Jamkard compelling because it reframes architecture as an ethical act rather than a merely technical one. Many architectural histories focus on monuments, dynasties, and visible achievements. The Vār directs attention elsewhere. Its importance lies not in what it displays but in what it protects. The narrative asks a question that remains profoundly relevant today: What deserves preservation when the future becomes uncertain?

From an art-historical perspective, the enclosure reveals how deeply concepts of design, environment, and memory were intertwined within Iranian cultural thought. Architecture is not

presented as a neutral container. It becomes an active participant in cultural survival. As an artist, I am equally struck by the narrative's treatment of beauty and craftsmanship. The preservation of artisans within the enclosure suggests that creative knowledge is not secondary to survival but integral to it. A civilization that loses its capacity to create also risks losing its capacity to imagine futures.

For me, Vār-e Jamkard remains significant because it transforms architecture into a form of cultural care. The enclosure protects life, but it also protects meaning. In this sense, the myth continues to offer a powerful framework for thinking about resilience, heritage, and the responsibilities of design in times of uncertainty.

References:

Assmann, J. (2011). *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge University Press.

Beazley, E., & Harverson, M. (1982). *Living with the Desert: Working Buildings of the Iranian Plateau*. Aris & Phillips.

Boyce, M. (1975). *A History of Zoroastrianism, Volume I*. Brill.

Crawford, H. (2015). *Sumer and the Sumerians* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Darmesteter, J. (1898). *The Zend-Avesta: Part II (The Sīrōzahs, Yaštsh, and Nyāyiš)*. Oxford University Press.

Folke, C. (2006). Resilience: The emergence of a perspective for social–ecological systems analyses. *Global Environmental Change*, 16(3), 253–267.

Gnoli, G. (1980). *Zoroaster's Time and Homeland*. Istituto Universitario Orientale.

Harrison, R. (2013). *Heritage: Critical Approaches*. Routledge.

Kiani, M. Y. (1982). Parthian Sites in Hyrcania: The Gurgan Plain. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag.

Lincoln, B. (1981). Priests, Warriors, and Cattle: A Study in the Ecology of Religions. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Meskoub, S. (1994). *Armaghān-e Morgh* [The Gift of the Bird]. Tehran: Agah Publications.

Pourdavoud, E. (1968). *Vendidad* (Persian Translation and Commentary). University of Tehran Press.

Skjærvø, P. O. (2006). Introduction to Zoroastrianism. Harvard University.

Vale, L. J., & Campanella, T. J. (2005). *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster*. Oxford University Press.

Walker, B., & Salt, D. (2006). *Resilience Thinking: Sustaining Ecosystems and People in a Changing World*. Island Press.